



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Botulism

What is botulism?

Botulism (boch-uh-liz-uhm) is a rare illness caused by a toxin produced by germ that grows best with no air.

What are the symptoms of botulism?

Symptoms of botulism begin within 12 to 36 hours (range of 6 hours to 10 days) after consuming food with the toxin/germ or after a wound have become infected with the germ. Symptoms include:

- Double vision or blurred vision
- Descending paralysis (muscle paralysis that begins in the upper body and moves downward)
- Muscle paralysis on both sides of the body at the same time

Babies with botulism appear tired, do not feed well, are constipated, and have a weak cry and limp muscles.

How is botulism spread?

Botulism is not spread from person to person. There are three types of botulism:

- Foodborne
- Infant
- Wound

Who is at risk for getting botulism?

Foodborne botulism can affect anyone who eats food with the toxin. Infant botulism affects children under one year of age who eats food, usually honey, with the germ. Wound botulism can affect anyone.

How do I know if I have botulism?

A person with symptoms affecting eyesight or speech should seek medical attention immediately. Other illnesses can produce symptoms that look like botulism. The health care provider may order tests to rule out other illnesses and may collect a stool or blood sample.

How is botulism treated?

Care in a hospital is the main treatment for all forms of botulism. Botulism antitoxin may be used as treatment and will keep the illness from becoming worse.

People can die from botulism if symptoms lead to breathing failure and infection in the lungs. Someone with severe botulism may need assistance from a breathing machine and medical attention for several months. The paralysis will slowly improve after several weeks and the person may experience tiredness and shortness of breath for several years.

How is botulism prevented?

Foodborne botulism:

- All home-canned foods must be properly processed and prepared.
- All home-canned foods should be boiled for at least 10 minutes before eating to destroy any toxin.
- Never eat foods from cans or jars that are bulging, discolored, have a bad taste or smell, or swollen lids or caps.
- Potatoes cooked wrapped in aluminum foil should be kept hot until they are eaten or refrigerated. If stored overnight, remove foil before refrigerating.
- Any oils containing garlic or herbs should be refrigerated.
- Outbreaks have been from uneviscerated fish, fermented fish, and improperly processed foods such as sautéed onions, chili peppers, and canned chili.

Infant botulism:

- Do not feed honey to babies less than 12 months of age. Honey can contain spores that will easily grow in infants.

Wound botulism:

- Carefully clean and disinfect all cuts and wounds. See a health care provider if a wound becomes infected.
- Do not use injectable street drugs.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dfbmd/diseases/botulism/>.

Food and Drug Administration, Food Facts for Consumers:

<http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm077286.htm>

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